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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**TITLE:**

U.S. COUNTERINSURGENCY DOCTRINE (1980-2003)

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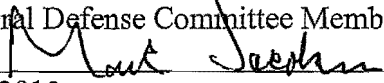
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## Executive Summary

**Title:** U.S. Counterinsurgency Doctrine (1980-2003)

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**Thesis:** The U.S. Army focus on conventional warfare during the period 1980-2003 resulted in a lack of counterinsurgency doctrinal development during that period, leaving the regular Army forces without a basis to conduct successful counterinsurgency operations in Iraq after the initial invasion in 2003.

**Discussion:** Colonel Harry G. Summers' *On Strategy* both reflected and influenced the Army's doctrinal development during the 1980s and 1990s. Summers argued that the U.S. failure in Vietnam was due to civilian leadership policy and flawed strategy. He further contended that the Army actually dedicated too much effort toward the insurgency rather than the real conventional threat from the NVA. Summers' explanation for the failure in Vietnam gained broad acceptance among Army leadership, resulting in a doctrinal and training focus on the conventional threat in Europe from Warsaw Pact countries during the Cold War. Counterinsurgency was, therefore, relegated exclusively to Special Forces rather than accounting for regular force efforts in counterinsurgency doctrine and training development.

El Salvador became the "laboratory" for the low intensity conflict doctrine that emerged during the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> The counterinsurgency experience in El Salvador offered several lessons. For instance, Foreign Internal Defense (FID) proponents present the El Salvador case study as a success primarily because it seemingly validated the U.S. Army's approach of using a limited number of advisors to combat an insurgency. Therefore, some of the lessons from El Salvador reinforced U.S. Army institutional thought and the prevailing counterinsurgency doctrine that focused on FID conducted by only Special Forces units at the expense of counterinsurgency doctrinal development and training that included general purpose units. However, an approach that largely excludes regular forces from counterinsurgency efforts requires an environment that is permissible enough for U.S. advisors to be present primarily as non-combatants. Clearly this is not the case in Afghanistan presently or in Iraq for the last several years, where the environment was not permissive and the host nation forces were not of sufficient maturity to do the preponderance of the fighting against the insurgency.

**Conclusion:** The doctrinal and training focus from 1980-2003 left the U.S. Army, and the U.S. military in general, predisposed to fight an unconventional threat in a conventional manner. Further, because of the lack of doctrinal, educational, and training focus on counterinsurgency during the previous two decades, the majority of senior military leaders such as General Sanchez, the V Corps commander in Iraq in 2003, were not adequately prepared to address the strategic and operational level concerns related to a counterinsurgency. This left military leaders and troops throughout Iraq in a situation where disparate operational and tactical approaches were taken against the insurgency, with mixed results. The Army simply had no adequate doctrinal basis that prepared its general-purpose forces to deal with the insurgency that emerged during the summer of 2003.

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## **Preface**

This paper addresses the development of counterinsurgency doctrine from 1980-2003 and its impact on the U.S. forces' initial approach to the Iraqi insurgency from 2003-2004. I became interested in this topic because of experiences during deployments to both Iraq and Afghanistan. I would like to acknowledge Dr. Mark Jacobsen and Dr. Charles McKenna for their expert advice and guidance. It has been my privilege to work with them. I am also thankful to my faculty advisor and fellow students as they greatly enhanced the tremendous learning experience at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College.

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*“Counterinsurgency operations generally have been neglected in broader American military doctrine and national security policies since the end of the Vietnam War over 30 years ago.” Army Field Manual 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency dated 15 December 2006<sup>2</sup>*

## **Introduction**

The Department of Defense defines doctrine as “the fundamental principles by which the military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgment in its application.”<sup>3</sup> Significantly, joint doctrine and fundamental doctrinal manuals such as the Army’s Field Manual (FM) 3-0 *Operations* serve as the framework for other Army doctrine and provide the basis for a wide variety of functions within the Army, including training, education, and systems acquisition. United States Army doctrine during the post-Vietnam era and leading up to the invasions of Afghanistan (in 2001) and Iraq (in 2003) emphasizes conventional warfare, maneuver, and combined arms, all necessary areas in which the armed forces should pursue excellence through its doctrine and training programs. However, a notable de-emphasis on counterinsurgency operations, doctrine development, and training by the Army regular forces as an institution marked this period as well. The U.S. Army focus on conventional warfare during the period 1980-2003 resulted in a lack of counterinsurgency doctrinal development during that period, leaving the regular Army forces without a basis to conduct counterinsurgency operations in Iraq after the initial invasion in 2003.

This paper will investigate how Colonel Harry G. Summers’ book, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, both reflected and influenced U.S. Army thinking about the causal factors of the failure in Vietnam as well as how this work influenced the development of Army counterinsurgency doctrine throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The paper will then examine U.S. Army doctrine during the post-Vietnam era, followed by an El Salvador case study as an example of the Army approach to counterinsurgency during the period. Further, the paper will demonstrate that both doctrine and lessons drawn from the El Salvador case study influenced the Army’s initial

flawed approach to the insurgency in Iraq in 2003. Finally, with the current U.S. military experience in Iraq concluding, this paper will offer some recommendations for progress in Afghanistan based on new doctrine such as FM 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5 titled *Counterinsurgency*, which was released in 2006.

## **Summers**

In his 1982 book *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, Colonel Harry G. Summers contends that civilian policymakers' direction caused the military strategists to focus too much on conducting counterinsurgency in Vietnam. He further argues that, as a result, the Army was not given the resources and the green light that it needed to conduct a conventional campaign against the real threat, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). To further illustrate this point, Summers states that military forces

are designed, equipped, and trained for a specific task: to fight and win on the battlefield. They are, in effect, a battle-ax. In the past we have tried to use them to accomplish tasks for which they were not designed – nation building in Vietnam being the most recent case in point.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the Army should be divested of tasks related to nation building, stability operations, counterinsurgency, and the like. Moreover, Summers argues that all war is essentially conventional and that any counterinsurgency efforts are best left to host nation forces since such efforts tend to distract U.S. forces, lessening their conventional war fighting power. Summers attempts to reinforce his argument by offering that the insurgency in Vietnam was strategically intended to cloak the real threat to American forces and the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) – conventional attacks by NVA divisions.

Summers' *On Strategy* took on a canonical status in the 1980s, feeding the Army leadership's desire to leave Vietnam behind and to dismiss unconventional operations as a lesser form of war perhaps best left to Special Forces or the Marines. The advantage of referring to counterinsurgency as "special" or "exceptional" is that such a categorization requires no serious



reformation of doctrine or training. With the exception of a small commitment of advisors capped at 55 in El Salvador, the Army was largely able to expel counterinsurgency from its jargon, training, and education. In fact, Conrad C. Crane, an Army War College scholar, notes that when instructors attempted to prepare a lesson on counterinsurgency in the 1980s “they found that the [Army’s Special Operations School] staff had been ordered to throw away their counterinsurgency files.”<sup>5</sup>

There are many differences between Iraq in 2003 and Vietnam, as observed in writing by Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl on the initial U.S. Army approach to the Iraqi insurgency from the summer of 2003 through 2004.

The American Army’s involvement in the Second Indochina War from 1950 to 1972 demonstrates the triumph of the institutional culture of an organization over attempts at doctrinal innovation and the diminution of the effectiveness of the organization at accomplishing national objectives. The United States Army had become reliant on firepower and technological superiority in its history of annihilating enemy forces...The concept that success in counterinsurgency consisted of separating the insurgents from popular support never took hold. The U.S. Army proceeded with its historical role of destroying the enemy army – even if it had a hard time finding it. The United States Army entered the Vietnam War with a doctrine well suited to fighting conventional war in Europe, but worse than useless for the counterinsurgency it was about to combat.<sup>6</sup>

Summers’ position regarding the lessons to be drawn from Vietnam not only influenced the Army’s lack of emphasis on developing counterinsurgency doctrine, but it also permeated the Army’s attitude toward counterinsurgency operations throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Former Army officer William R. Meara, who served as a trainer with the El Salvador Armed Forces (ESAF) in 1986, commented that the Army placed little importance on counterinsurgency missions such as the one in El Salvador.

While people...were struggling against Communism in Central America, I was playing silly games in North Carolina. At around this time, some friends in MILGRP [the U.S. Military Group in El Salvador] initiated an effort to bring me back to El Salvador on another six-month mission. I wanted to go, but one of my superiors wanted me to stay at [Fort] Bragg and help make him look good in upcoming training exercises. Far too many people in the military bureaucracy were more worried about their ratings and their promotions than the war effort in Central America. I had always derived a great deal of personal satisfaction from my military

service, but I was getting tired of working under a hierarchy that sometimes seemed more interested in bureaucratic battles than in the fight against Communism.<sup>7</sup>

### **Krepinevich**

Andrew F. Krepinevich's 1986 book, *The Army and Vietnam*, is clearly intended as a direct rebuttal to Summers' thesis as presented in *On Strategy*. Krepinevich criticizes the conventional, large-unit approach to the war in Vietnam, referred to as the "Army Concept," and lauds the Marine Corps' counterinsurgency operations and Combined Action Platoons (CAP) program in response to the insurgency in Vietnam. He criticizes the Army's approach that focused on the attrition of the enemy's forces, noting that the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) drove up U.S. expenditure of resources both in terms of materiel and casualties. Furthermore, the focus on the attrition of Communist forces, often through indirect fire that caused collateral damage, also resulted in the unintended consequence of alienating the South Vietnamese population.

Krepinevich also contends throughout his book that counterinsurgency warfare was never given the priority in Vietnam as was conventional operations. To support his contention, he states that Army strategy apportioned

different mixes of Army assets toward internal (insurgent) and external (overt/conventional) threats to South Vietnam's security, with the Army leadership favoring a mix heavily weighted toward the latter consideration, while the nature of the conflict mandated an orientation primarily focused on the former.<sup>8</sup>

Krepinevich directly addressed Summers' argument that the Army could have succeeded through a conventional mid-intensity conflict approach that included a joint U.S.-ARVN-ROK push into Laos. This approach was General Westmoreland's proposed alternate strategy in Vietnam. Summers argued that the plan would have blocked the NVA (the external threat) from coming into South Vietnam thus allowing the South Vietnamese – and not the U.S. forces – to deal with the insurgency (the internal threat). This concept was in concert with Summers' argument that the NVA and not the insurgency was the main threat in Vietnam. Krepinevich countered Summers'

argument by asserting, “until the Tet Offensive of 1968, the VC were by far the principal force in the field against the RVNAF, receiving the bulk of their logistical support from *within* South Vietnam.”<sup>9</sup> Krepinevich also hypothesized that, with a large enemy force arrayed in Laos, nothing would have stopped the NVA from essentially conducting an end around into South Vietnam across the Thai border. Krepinevich concluded this theoretical discussion by stating that the barriers to success in Vietnam as noted by Summers in *On Strategy* appear to be a “*post hoc* justification” for applying conventional theories and methods to a foreign insurgency environment that the Army could not or chose not to understand.<sup>10</sup>

Summers’ *On Strategy* argues that the U.S. failure in Vietnam is due to civilian leadership policy and flawed strategy and that the Army actually dedicated too much effort toward the insurgency rather than the real conventional threat from the NVA. Krepinevich offers information supporting the theory that the Army’s institutional position as noted above impeded and limited U.S. Army counterinsurgency doctrinal development and education during the post-Vietnam era. In terms of professional military education, as of 1986, the Army had made an effort to cover what was now termed low-intensity operations at several of the branch and service educational institutions. However, Krepinevich states, “the time devoted to such study remains small compared with that given “normal” (as opposed to “special”) operations.”<sup>11</sup> The curricula at Army and Marine Corps schools alike remained largely focused on conventional, mid-intensity conflict focused partially because the leadership in the services during the 1980s had risen as commanders and staff members of main-force units, not as advisors involved with counterinsurgency campaigns. Therefore, the Army had only a small leadership cadre that had served as advisors to promote the merits of counterinsurgency doctrine and education. As one general said, counterinsurgency became “a “fad,” something that was “all the rage” in the days of the New Frontiersmen but now should be forgotten in favor of the long-neglected big-war contingency in Europe.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the

Army focused its doctrine on conventional operations and mid-intensity conflict for much of the post-Vietnam era.

Krepinevich also reviews a few doctrinal publications, including FM 100-20 *Low Intensity Operations*, which, despite the Army's experience in Vietnam, still emphasizes conventional operations in response to threats such as insurgency in a low intensity environment. The doctrine espoused in the 1981 version of Low Intensity Operations further promotes the significant role for armored and mechanized infantry units, due to their superior firepower and mobility in the low intensity conflict environment. The doctrine also gives "search and destroy" missions as conducted in Vietnam a new life under the term "strike campaigns." The doctrine further fails to recognize the importance of influence on and interaction with the population in a counterinsurgency environment by advising commanders that they will "not normally occupy the area for an extended time following a successful attack."<sup>13</sup>

Krepinevich concludes *The Army and Vietnam* by writing that the Army has learned little from its experience in Vietnam. Moreover, in the face of a growing number of low intensity conflict threats arising in the Third World (as of 1986), he commented that the Army remains largely unprepared to address those conflicts to which it is likely to be committed by the civilian leadership due to national interests. Krepinevich closes by saying that such a situation "represents a very dangerous mixture that in the end may see the Army again attempting to fight a conventional war against a very unconventional enemy."<sup>14</sup>

Summers and Krepinevich offered two countervailing arguments that sought to explain the reasons for failure in Vietnam, dividing military leaders and analysts into two separate camps. Summers argued that the Army was not permitted to fight the necessary conventional war against the North Vietnamese Army and that the insurgency in the south was merely a sideshow. This view

became more widely accepted and had a greater influence on subsequent U.S. Army doctrinal trends.

### **U.S. Army Doctrinal Trends (1980-2003)**

The following survey of major doctrinal trends from 1980-2003 will provide some necessary background before embarking on an examination of specific Army counterinsurgency doctrinal publications that emerged during that same period. In 1981, the concept of “low intensity conflict” or LIC emerged formally in U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 100-20. The concept of “military operations other than war” or MOOTW began to replace LIC in unconventional warfare discussions around 1993, resulting in the emergence of Joint Publication 3-07 which prescribed joint doctrine for MOOTW. In response to the Balkan experience during the early-1990s in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, a draft form of FM 100-20 was presented as “stability and support operations” or SASO. Although the new version of FM 100-20 was not published as “stability and support operations,” the concept became prevalent in both service and joint doctrine in the late-1990s and early-2000s.<sup>15</sup>

Underlying all of the doctrinal developments listed above was the primacy of the Army’s Air Land Battle doctrine, which emerged in the late-1970s and subsequently drove all U.S. Army doctrinal development and concepts, particularly throughout the 1980s. For instance, low intensity conflict doctrine during the 1980s was not an evolutionary concept at all, as it focused on conventional responses to guerrilla threats rather than a true counterinsurgency approach. The 1981 version of FM 100-20 emphasized battalion and brigade operations and prioritized military concerns well above critical counterinsurgency considerations such as economic development, sound political leadership, and basic services. Low intensity conflict doctrine in its earliest form came to be tested in the “laboratory” of El Salvador during a critical period for the Reagan

administration in which both low intensity conflict doctrine and the counterinsurgency strategy in El Salvador underwent a concomitant evolution.<sup>16</sup>

The Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas played an integral role in the development of an interim version of FM100-20, called Field Circular (FC) 100-20, *Low-Intensity Conflict*.<sup>17</sup> FC 100-20 signaled a doctrinal departure from a purely conventional response to insurgency and served as an institutional placeholder until the next version of FM 100-20 could be published. By 1990, low intensity conflict doctrine, as prescribed in follow-on versions to the 1981 FM 100-20, included more complementary political and military considerations in operations, such as counter-narcotics and peacekeeping. Operations in El Salvador during the 1980s influenced a change in low intensity conflict doctrine, which, by 1990, was more closely related to counterinsurgency theory than its 1981 predecessor.<sup>18</sup>

Occasionally, geopolitical events signal the need for a strategic shift or a change in military doctrine. Such was the case in 1989 when the Soviet Union collapsed rendering the previous Warsaw Pact no longer relevant. In the early-1990s, the uncertain environment that emerged in the immediate post-Cold War Era and the so-called “new world order” caused military thinkers to reconsider the Department of Defense’s approach across the spectrum of conflict.<sup>19</sup> The 1993 version of FM 100-5, *Operations*, acknowledges the operations other than war concept, noting that “[t]he prime focus of the Army is warfighting, yet the Army’s frequent role in operations other than war is critical.”<sup>20</sup> Despite the criticality of operations other than war, the concept received only a few paragraphs of attention in the 1993 version of FM 100-5. However, one result of the demand for new doctrine for a new environment was the 1995 emergence of Joint Publication 3-07, which replaced low intensity conflict with a concept called “military operations other than war.” Although Joint Pub 3-07 included a refined version of many low intensity conflict principles, the doctrine explicitly subordinated political concerns and other counterinsurgency considerations to traditional

warfighting principles.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the emergent joint doctrine provided little impetus for the services to shift their doctrinal focus from conventional to other than war or insurgent threats that were to dominate the next ten years of conflict. The following section of this paper will examine specific doctrine that emerged under the general trends noted above.

#### **U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine (1980-2003)**

An examination of U.S. Army doctrine during the post-Vietnam era and leading up to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq reveals an enduring emphasis on conventional warfare, maneuver, and combined arms, all necessary areas in which the armed forces should pursue excellence through its doctrine and training programs. However, a notable de-emphasis on counterinsurgency operations, doctrine development, and training by the Army regular forces as an institution marked this period as well. The following section of this paper will begin with a survey of Army *Field Manuals (FM) 100-5 Operations* and *3-0 Operations*, the core and most often referred to manuals for Army war fighters from 1980-2003 before examining *FM 90-8 Counterguerrilla Operations*, the topically significant yet less often referred to doctrinal publication.

The *Operations* manual provides the basic war fighting doctrine for Army commanders. It describes how the Army intends to conduct campaigns, operations, battles, and lesser engagements. Significantly, the 1993 version of *FM 100-5 Operations* notes that its doctrine furnishes the authoritative foundation for subordinate doctrine, force design, material acquisition, professional education, and individual and unit training.”<sup>22</sup> The impact of doctrine on training is more than a minor point considering the test of a battalion commander during the 1980s and 1990s was his ability to successfully conduct conventional training exercises in the crucible at the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California, situated in the Mojave Desert near the California-Nevada border. The training exercises reflected the doctrinal focus on conventional operations

espoused by FM 100-5 (including the 1976, 1982, and 1993 versions) as well as its successor FM 3-0 (14 June 2001).

Moreover, the exercises successfully challenged and assessed the commander's ability to coordinate and bring to bear the combined force of infantry, artillery, attack helicopters, fighting vehicles, and tanks.<sup>23</sup> However, there was no focus on counterinsurgency or post-conflict operations in the NTC training. The lack of focus in training was a direct reflection of the inattention given to counterinsurgency operations in *Operations*. Neither the doctrine nor the training considered what occurs after the initial victory in battle. In fact, the 1993 version of *Operations* covers the topic of "war termination and post-conflict operations" in four paragraphs, amounting to less than one page of the doctrinal publication. In a study during the 1990s, Army Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, when addressing the lack of emphasis on counterinsurgency, contended, "the post-Vietnam [A]rmy intentionally turned away from the painful memories of its Vietnam experience." He later noted that the 1976 version of *Operations* "did not mention counterinsurgency."<sup>24</sup>

However, the 1993 version of *Operations* does include counterinsurgency in its sections on "Special Forces" and "Military Operations Other Than War [MOOTW]." The doctrine emphasizes that the Army can conduct counterinsurgency operations in the context of Foreign Internal Defense (FID) and that such operations are best handled by Special Forces. *Operations* (1993) states that

[B]ecause support for insurgencies is often covert, SOF [Special Operations Forces] is frequently involved. Due to their extensive unconventional warfare training, SOF are well-suited to provide this support. General-purpose forces may also be called upon when the situation requires their particular specialties or when the scope of operations is so vast that conventional forces are required.<sup>25</sup>

The 1993 version of *Operations* essentially accounts for the exceptional case of counterinsurgency operations with an approach that would maintain a minimal U.S. forces footprint on the ground



while implicitly expressing a reticence to commit so-called general purposes forces to such an endeavor; this viewpoint is quite consistent with that expressed by Summers in *On Strategy*.

Field Manual 90-8 *Counter guerrilla Operations* (1986), a doctrinal publication directed at commanders and staffs at the Army brigade level and below, seemingly addresses counterinsurgency operations in a serious manner during the post-Vietnam era. However, one must consider the difference between counterinsurgency and counter guerrilla operations, as paragraph 1-12 of *Counter guerrilla Operations* suggests.

The internal defense and development (IDAD) program is geared to counter the whole insurgency. It does this through [addressing] conditions which may cause the insurgency. This program which addresses both the populace and the insurgent can be termed counterinsurgency. Counter guerrilla operations are geared to the active military element of the insurgent movement only. To this end, counter guerrilla operations are viewed as a supporting component of the counterinsurgency effort.<sup>26</sup>

In 2010 vernacular, the IDAD program as it relates to counterinsurgency presages the “whole of government” approach that includes multiple government agencies providing services, enablers, and advising capabilities, all complementarily, and in many cases with supremacy, to the Department of Defense efforts. In other words, FM 90-8 addresses a subset of counterinsurgency in the form of counter guerrilla operations directed specifically at the military aspects of the insurgency. Further, the doctrinal concepts described in FM 90-8 are conceived under the umbrella of foreign internal defense (FID) in which U.S. forces are assisting the host nation to combat its own insurgency, as in El Salvador. FM 90-8 further illustrates that the Army doctrine of the post-Vietnam era does not conceive of or address circumstances in which regular U.S. military forces will pursue counterinsurgency responsibilities.

The Air Land Battle concept was the basis for the Army’s doctrine through the 1980s and 1990s; in general, the concept emphasized maneuvering land forces complemented by air forces attacking the enemy in depth. The Air Land Battle concept was oriented towards the Warsaw Pact threat in Central Europe during the Cold War. The 1986 version of FM 90-8 only addresses the

military aspect of the insurgency, but the manual does, nonetheless, contain some worthwhile passages and material for the reader interested in exploring the military aspect of counterinsurgency. For instance, counterinsurgency scholars may note with approval that FM 90-8 does include descriptions of Mao Tse-Tung's three phases of a guerrilla movement as well as the principles of guerrilla tactics, although the inclusion occurred over twenty years after the Vietnam War. However, inclusion of an Army Air Land Battle concept such as "move fast, strike hard, and finish rapidly"<sup>27</sup> seems oddly placed as a method of dealing with an insurgency environment that includes myriad factors beyond the typical conventional threats for which the Air Land Battle concept is designed. However, some Air Land Battle doctrinal concepts included in FM 90-8 such as "ensure unity of effort" and "direct friendly strengths against enemy weaknesses" are indeed portable to a counterinsurgency environment. The Air Land Battle concept was ultimately superseded by the Network-Centric Warfare concept that emerged in the late-1990s.

### **El Salvador Case Study**

The insurgency in El Salvador demonstrates how a counterinsurgency success can come at a minimal cost to U.S. troops, significant cost to U.S. treasure, and seemingly validate U.S. Army doctrine. Wray R. Johnson contends that the war in El Salvador was considered by many analysts to be "a laboratory for low intensity conflict doctrine."<sup>28</sup> Success in El Salvador led the Army to believe that its counterinsurgency doctrine had been validated and that it was, indeed, prepared for the next major insurgency threat that it would encounter. Before embarking on the following survey of the insurgency in El Salvador from 1980-1992 and lessons that can be drawn from the U.S. intervention, a general introduction of the strategic interests for the U.S. is appropriate. The strategic interests of the U.S. in El Salvador were based on a simple premise. The U.S. was interested in preventing the Marxist-Leninist Farabundo Marti National Liberation (FMLN) insurgency from taking power in El Salvador. Despite the limited objectives in El Salvador, the

U.S. Congress and the public remained skeptical about U.S. motives and potential for success there throughout the 1980s. The U.S. minimized the risk of provoking the Soviet Union by an indirect intervention in El Salvador that was capped at 55 advisors to the Salvadoran armed forces. President Reagan had other, more provocative, options such as direct U.S. combat unit intervention in El Salvador or a direct confrontation with Cuba where supplies and support for the FMLN as well as the Sandinistas in Nicaragua originated.<sup>29</sup> The strategy executed during the Reagan administration satisfied military and political leaders' objections to a direct intervention with combat forces against an insurgency thus avoiding conjuring up images of Vietnam. The U.S., therefore, focused on its objectives of supporting the counterinsurgency and political reform through the presence and actions of a relatively small cadre of advisors who were not supposed to participate in any combat operations.

The FMLN insurgency essentially began in 1980 when it formed from several other Marxist-Leninist groups and became a more formidable organization when it allied with Cuba and the Sandinista Communist movement in Nicaragua. The FMLN was essentially a tool of Cuba and Nicaragua and served the larger aim of promoting communist movements in Latin America. The FMLN emerged in response to a military junta of young officers that seized power in October 1979 and promised land reform and democratic processes in El Salvador. However, the junta remained aligned with right wing factions in the government and the Salvadoran officer corps and failed to deliver on nearly all of the promised reforms.<sup>30</sup> The FMLN launched its ill-fated but ambitious final offensive in January 1981, partially seizing over 81 cities or villages throughout El Salvador. The FMLN offensive was actually an act of desperation in that the Salvadoran government's repression through intimidation by its armed and police forces and the ubiquitous death squads were actually having a profound effect on the FMLN through its death toll and freedom of operation. Further, the November 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, who promised to confront communism in Central

America, affected the FMLN calculus to conduct the offensive. The FMLN, rightfully concerned that President-elect Reagan would be more aggressive than his predecessor against communism in Latin America, wanted to launch the offensive and seize power before Reagan's inauguration in late-January 1981. The offensive failed largely due to a lack of coordinated action by subordinate FMLN organizations and an effective response from Salvadoran government army and security forces.<sup>31</sup>

The period 1981-1984 was marked by an FMLN that engaged in guerrilla warfare with a series of attacks on El Salvador Armed Forces (ESAF) conventional units and garrisons. The ESAF was at a low point of effectiveness until U.S. assistance from advisors, equipment, and funding gained momentum and effectiveness around 1983. The ESAF became more effective against the FMLN through its training from U.S. advisors and use of air attacks that dispersed guerrilla units and forced them to work in much smaller elements. From a strictly military standpoint, the period 1985-1989 was marked by a strategy of erosion by the FMLN in which they engaged in smaller scale yet effective harassing tactics such as mines and attacks on economic targets thus discrediting the government. Further, during the 1980s the FMLN decreased in manpower from 14,000 to 7,000 while the ESAF, primarily through U.S. funding and training, grew from 20,000 to 56,000.<sup>32</sup> In general, the FMLN and ESAF had reached a stalemate by the late 1980s, which culminated with the second "final offensive" in 1989. Upon failure of the offensive and with no military end in sight, a phase in which both sides engaged in a negotiated solution for three years began.

In the political realm, the 1980s in El Salvador were marked by a series of political leaders who were either unable or unwilling to end the civil war. However, the election of Alfredo Cristiani along with the second failed final offensive marked the beginning of the final phase of the civil war in El Salvador. Cristiani conducted positive economic reforms, reduced corruption, and held death squad human rights violators accountable. All of those reforms diffused many of the arguments that

the FMLN had for fighting as insurgents. Further, he provided a forum and mechanism by which leftists, including FMLN leaders, could negotiate terms for peace and return to the political process.<sup>33</sup> The fall of the Soviet Union and subsequent cutoff of funding flowing through Cuba to communist movements in Central America further signaled the end for the FMLN insurgency. In 1992, a peace treaty was signed in Chapultepec, Mexico, giving the FMLN legitimacy as a political party and ending the civil war.

### **The Right Lessons?**

The El Salvador counterinsurgency experience from 1980-1992 offers several lessons for counterinsurgency operations in general. However, not all of the lessons are relevant to today's environment and therefore may not be universally applied. Foreign Internal Defense (FID) proponents present the El Salvador case study as a success primarily because it seemingly validated the U.S. Army's approach of using a limited number of advisors to combat an insurgency. The number of advisors to the ESAF was capped at 55. In fact, one must hesitate to hold up El Salvador as an example, for instance, of what advisors and forces in Afghanistan should do today. The insurgency was ultimately beaten, although the ESAF might have been defeated by the FMLN around the mid-1980s without U.S. assistance. Ultimately, the U.S. shifted its goal of defeating the FMLN through assistance to the Salvadoran government to a negotiated solution in which the FMLN was co-opted into the political process by the President of El Salvador, Cristiani.

Victor Rosello served as the senior U.S. military intelligence advisor with the U.S. Military Group (USMILGP) and in a number of other assignments in El Salvador during the 1980s. In a winter 1993-94 *Parameters* article, he noted that

[The] no-combat-involvement restriction placed on US military trainers and the 55-man limitation placed on the overall US military advisory effort by [C]ongress proved to be judicious in the long run and should be studied as a model for future interventions of this nature.<sup>34</sup>

By “future interventions of this nature,” Rosello presumably means interventions where the environment is permissible enough for U.S. advisors to be present as non-combatants. Clearly this is not the case in Afghanistan presently or in Iraq for the last several years, where the environment was not permissive and the host nation forces were not of sufficient maturity to do the preponderance of the fighting against the insurgency.

A valuable lesson from the El Salvador case study can be found in the influence that U.S. advisors had on the ESAF's evolution into a professional military and the reduction of El Salvador's human rights violations.<sup>35</sup> One of the greatest criticisms of U.S. support of the Salvadoran government was that the ESAF and political leaders continued to support torture and the death squads while U.S. training and funding continued. The eventual improvement in the human rights category and prosecution of violators by the El Salvadoran government served to both legitimize the government and the ESAF while decreasing FMLN support at the same time. To be sure, there were tragic and terrible incidents such as the Jesuit Priest murders at the hands of the Salvadoran government and the ESAF in 1989 and the assassination of a bishop in 1980. This incident set off alarms that the American assistance to the counterinsurgency may have failed at that point and that a return to the violence and death squads so common earlier in the decade was likely. President G.H.W. Bush threatened that U.S. assistance and funding would be pulled if the murderers were not brought to justice and the peace process ultimately continued over the next three years.

### **Insurgency in Iraq**

The Central American counterinsurgency experience during the 1980s and early-1990s offered several lessons as noted above. However, some of those lessons reinforced U.S. Army institutional thought and the prevailing counterinsurgency doctrine, focusing on FID conducted by only Special Forces units. As a result, the conventional Army's position, as shown by doctrinal emphasis and education at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in Fort

Leavenworth, Kansas contributed to the Army's failure to adapt its operational plans and tactics to combat the insurgency in Iraq in 2003.

The doctrinal and training focus during the post-Vietnam era left the U.S. Army, and the U.S. military in general, predisposed to fight an unconventional threat in a conventional manner. A Special Forces lieutenant colonel that served in Baghdad during 2003-2004 remarked that "[w]hat you are seeing here is an unconventional war fought conventionally." He further stated that "having the U.S. military out in patrols – that is, the presence mission – wasn't in and of itself necessarily stabilizing the situation."<sup>36</sup> In his book, *Fiasco – The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, Thomas E. Ricks wrote that "[U.S. forces] were following their training, performing according to doctrine, and busting their hearts to do the right thing." However, civilian leaders and military commanders "had failed to define what kind of war was being fought and publicly had insisted that it was something other than what it was."<sup>37</sup>

While focusing on conventional doctrine and tactics during 2003-2004, U.S. forces ignored several significant counterinsurgency principles. In his text, *Counterinsurgency Warfare – Theory and Practice*, French Army Lieutenant Colonel David Galula noted the importance of both unity of effort and unity of command.

Clearly, more than any other kind of warfare, counterinsurgency must respect the principle of single direction. A single boss must direct the operations from beginning to end.<sup>38</sup>

Galula further emphasized that the boss should be a civilian. In violation of Galula's principle, the U.S. effort in Iraq from 2003-2004 suffered from a disparate military and civilian command structure and had no persistent strategy to ensure unity of effort between civilian and military entities.

Galula also warned against large-scale conventional operations in the face of an insurgent threat.

The strategy of conventional warfare prescribes the conquest of the enemy's territory, the destruction of his forces. The trouble here is that the enemy holds no territory and refuses to fight for it. He is everywhere and nowhere.<sup>39</sup>

Despite Galula's often cited but seldom read guidance, U.S. forces often engaged in large operations that included a "cordon and search" element aimed at sweeping up local males in order to gather intelligence. Such operations not only alienated the population and fed the desire for revenge among young Iraqi males but also resulted in the overcrowding of U.S. detention facilities such as Abu Graib. These operations fed the contention prevalent among military commanders such as General Ricardo Sanchez, the senior U.S. commander in Iraq in 2003, that U.S. conventional operations against the insurgency could succeed if only better information was available.<sup>40</sup>

Further compounding the lack of focus on counterinsurgency principles during 2003-2004 was the U.S. Army's failure to identify critical elements of the operational level of war in the counterinsurgency. The majority of Army leaders had spent the previous decades primarily planning and training for conventional operations as dictated by prevailing U.S. Army doctrine such as "Air Land Battle" as described in FM 3-0 *Operations*. That doctrine and training served the U.S. Army well during Operation Desert Storm and during the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. However, retired U.S. Army General Robert Scales stated that Army leaders were not prepared to identify what the operational level of war was in a counterinsurgency. "The operational level of war in Iraq was dealing with Iraqis, with nongovernmental organizations, with the media, with the rest of the world," Scales stated. "The center of gravity was the will of the people."<sup>41</sup>

In fact, General Sanchez never issued a campaign plan that provided an overarching strategy to the division and subordinate commanders throughout Iraq.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, commanders took disparate approaches in different areas of Iraq in the absence of strategic and operational guidance, with mixed results. Although some units such as the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division under then Major



General David Petraeus implemented counterinsurgency operations with success, most U.S. units remained focused on conventional operations against an unconventional threat. Major Isaiah Wilson, who served as an official Army historian in 2003 and later as a strategic planner in Iraq commented,

Winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people was the guiding purpose of all civil military actions in the north [with the 101<sup>st</sup>]. While other divisions conducted “anti-insurgency” operations, aimed at killing the enemy, the 101<sup>st</sup> waged a “counter-insurgency” campaign, meant to undercut support for the enemy.<sup>43</sup>

However, the population-focused approach taken by General Petraeus in Mosul in 2003 would not be widely adopted by U.S. forces until 2006.<sup>44</sup>

### **Current Doctrine and Recommendations**

In 2006, the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps jointly authored FM 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5 titled *Counterinsurgency* while Soldiers and Marines battled insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq. The foreword to *Counterinsurgency* notes that the “manual is designed to fill a doctrinal gap. It has been 20 years since the Army published a field manual devoted exclusively to counterinsurgency operations. For the Marine Corps it has been 25 years.”<sup>45</sup> The manual provides overarching principles and guidelines for counterinsurgency operations. Further, the manual served as a framework for the U.S. Integrated Civil-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan dated 10 August 2009 and the International Security Assistance Force Commander’s Counterinsurgency Guidance issued by General Stanley A. McChrystal in 2010. The current U.S. military experience in Iraq is concluding with the vast majority of troops departing by the spring of 2010. Both civilian and military resources have shifted to Afghanistan. The doctrinal publication, *Counterinsurgency*, and the Central American counterinsurgency experience form the basis of the following recommendations related to ongoing counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan.

Army Field Manual 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 *Counterinsurgency* emphasizes the importance of the population in counterinsurgency operations, a maxim with examples abound in historical case studies. The manual notes that

[A]t its core, COIN is a struggle for the population's support. The protection, welfare, and support of the people are vital to success. Gaining and maintaining that support is a formidable challenge. Achieving these aims requires synchronizing the efforts of many nonmilitary and HN [host nation] agencies in a comprehensive approach.<sup>46</sup>

The Afghan people are the center of gravity. Interagency and multinational efforts should focus on population security and Afghan governance that serves and supports the people. General McChrystal's *ISAF Counterinsurgency Guidance*, amplifies this point.

Protecting the Afghan people is the mission. The Afghan people will decide who wins this fight and we (GIROA [the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan] and ISAF) are in a struggle for their support. The effort to gain and maintain that support must inform every action that we take. Essentially, we and the insurgents are presenting an argument for the future of the people of Afghanistan: they will decide which argument is the most attractive, most convincing, and has the greatest chance of success.<sup>47</sup>

General McChrystal further directed personnel under his command to consider the Afghan people in all actions, develop partnerships with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and build Afghan governance capacity. Successful operations under those tenets require a better coordinated, unified, and complementary effort among military, civilian, and international organizations in Afghanistan.

Poppy harvesting and trafficking remains a significant source of funding for the insurgency in Afghanistan. Further, poppy production permeates Afghan political and economic structures, resulting in widespread corruption that implicates officials, including President Karzai's brother, at all levels. Breaking the link between poppy production and the drug-fueled insurgency in Afghanistan will require a focused U.S. interagency approach that works with international partners, including Pakistan. The previous poppy eradication policy of focusing on farmers and destroying

their crops while providing cash reparations was flawed and has justifiably ceased. Interagency efforts should focus on drug traffickers, key drug lords, and targeted alternative crop solutions. Lessons can be learned from U.S. Southern Command's (SOUTHCOM) experiences in Colombia. Central Command (CENTCOM) and ISAF should consult with the SOUTHCOM Commander and staff on lessons learned related to facing a narcotics-fueled insurgency, training paramilitary forces, and dealing with cross-border issues in their SOUTHCOM area of responsibility. CENTCOM and ISAF should also consider the Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF)-South model when building the Counter-narcotics Combined Joint Interagency Task Force-Afghanistan (CN CJIATF-A), which will interdict and disrupt poppy production and trafficking in Afghanistan.<sup>48</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The U.S. Army's focus on conventional warfare from 1980-2003 resulted in a lack of counterinsurgency doctrinal development during that period, leaving the regular Army forces without a basis to conduct successful counterinsurgency operations in Iraq after the initial invasion in 2003. Summers' *On Strategy* both reflected and influenced the Army's doctrinal development during the 1980s and 1990s. Summers argued that the U.S. failure in Vietnam was due to civilian leadership policy and flawed strategy. He further contended that the Army dedicated too much effort toward the insurgency rather than the real conventional threat from the NVA. Summers' explanation for the failure in Vietnam gained broad acceptance among Army leadership, resulting in a doctrinal and training focus on the conventional threat in Europe from Warsaw Pact countries during the Cold War. Counterinsurgency was, therefore, relegated exclusively to Special Forces at the expense of accounting for general purpose force efforts in counterinsurgency doctrine and training development.

El Salvador became the "laboratory" for the low intensity conflict doctrine that emerged during the 1980s.<sup>49</sup> The counterinsurgency experience in El Salvador offered several lessons. For

instance, Foreign Internal Defense (FID) proponents present the El Salvador case study as a success primarily because it seemingly validated the U.S. Army's approach of using a limited number of advisors to combat an insurgency. The number of U.S. advisors to the El Salvador Armed Forces (ESAF) was capped at 55. Therefore, some of the lessons from El Salvador reinforced U.S. Army institutional thought and the prevailing counterinsurgency doctrine that focused on FID conducted by only Special Forces units at the expense of counterinsurgency doctrinal development and training that included regular units. However, an approach that largely excludes general purpose forces from counterinsurgency efforts requires an environment that is permissible enough for U.S. advisors to be present primarily as non-combatants. Clearly this is not the case in Afghanistan presently or in Iraq for the last several years, where the environment was not permissive and the host nation forces were not of sufficient maturity to do the preponderance of the fighting against the insurgency.

The doctrinal and training focus from 1980-2003, therefore, left the U.S. Army, and the U.S. military in general, predisposed to fight an unconventional threat in a conventional manner. Further, because of the lack of doctrinal, educational, and training focus on counterinsurgency during the previous two decades, the majority of senior military leaders such as General Sanchez, the V Corps commander in Iraq in 2003, were not adequately prepared to address the strategic and operational level concerns related to a counterinsurgency. An overarching campaign plan that provided guidance on "dealing with Iraqis, with nongovernmental organizations, with the media" was not provided in 2003.<sup>50</sup> This left military leaders and troops throughout Iraq in a situation where disparate operational and tactical approaches were taken against the insurgency, with mixed results. The Army simply had no adequate doctrinal and training basis that prepared its general purpose forces to deal with the insurgency that emerged during the summer of 2003. A more

successful approach that focused on the people of Iraq as the critical element in the counterinsurgency effort was not widely adopted by U.S. forces until 2006.<sup>51</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army and Headquarters, United States Marine Corps. *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army and Headquarters, United States Marine Corps, December 15, 2006), Foreword.
- <sup>3</sup> DOD Dictionary of Military Terms, [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod\\_dictionary/?zoom\\_query=doctrine&zoom\\_sort=0&zoom\\_per\\_page=10&zoom\\_and=1](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary/?zoom_query=doctrine&zoom_sort=0&zoom_per_page=10&zoom_and=1).
- <sup>4</sup> Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy – A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 184.
- <sup>5</sup> Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young, *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam or, How Not to Learn from the Past* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 27.
- <sup>6</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 222.
- <sup>7</sup> William R. Meara, *Contra Cross: Insurgency and Tyranny in Central America, 1979-1989* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 199.
- <sup>8</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 264.
- <sup>9</sup> Krepinevich, 263.
- <sup>10</sup> Krepinevich, 263.
- <sup>11</sup> Krepinevich, 272.
- <sup>12</sup> Krepinevich, 272.
- <sup>13</sup> Krepinevich, 273.
- <sup>14</sup> Krepinevich, 275.
- <sup>15</sup> Johnson, 173-175.
- <sup>16</sup> Johnson, 88.
- <sup>17</sup> Johnson, 123.
- <sup>18</sup> Johnson, 88.
- <sup>19</sup> Johnson, 146.
- <sup>20</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army. *Operations*, FM 100-5 (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, June 1995), 2-1.
- <sup>21</sup> Johnson, 161.
- <sup>22</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army. *Operations*, FM 100-5 (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, June 14, 1993), iv.
- <sup>23</sup> Ricks, 130.
- <sup>24</sup> Ricks, 133.
- <sup>25</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army. *Operations*, FM 100-5 (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, June 14, 1993), 13-8.
- <sup>26</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army. *Counterinsurgency Operations*, FM 90-8 (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, August 29, 1986), paragraph 1-12.
- <sup>27</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army. *Counterinsurgency Operations*, FM 90-8 (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, August 29, 1986), paragraph 1-21.
- <sup>28</sup> Johnson, 88.
- <sup>29</sup> Todd Greentree, *Crossroads of Intervention: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Lessons from Central America* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security, 2008), 162.

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- <sup>30</sup> Mark Moyar, *A Question of Command – Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 170-171.
- <sup>31</sup> Greentree, 91.
- <sup>32</sup> Greentree, 94-95.
- <sup>33</sup> Moyar, 185-187.
- <sup>34</sup> Victor Rosello, “Lessons from El Salvador,” *Parameters*, vol. 23, no. 4 (Winter 1993-1994): 204.
- <sup>35</sup> Rosello, 205.
- <sup>36</sup> Ricks, 214.
- <sup>37</sup> Ricks, 215.
- <sup>38</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare – Theory and Practice* (Westport, Connecticut, Praeger Security International 1964, 2006), 61.
- <sup>39</sup> Galula, 50.
- <sup>40</sup> Ricks, 223.
- <sup>41</sup> Ricks, 225.
- <sup>42</sup> Ricks, 226.
- <sup>43</sup> Ricks, 229.
- <sup>44</sup> Ricks, 232.
- <sup>45</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army and Headquarters, United States Marine Corps. *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army and Headquarters, United States Marine Corps, December 15, 2006), 1-28.
- <sup>46</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army and Headquarters, United States Marine Corps. *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army and Headquarters, United States Marine Corps, December 15, 2006), 1-28.
- <sup>47</sup> U.S. Force-Afghanistan/International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan. *ISAF Commander’s Counterinsurgency Guidance*, by General (USA) Stanley A. McChrystal and Command Sergeant Major (USA) Michael T. Hall, 1.
- <sup>48</sup> Matthew Simmons, “Afghanistan Position Paper,” (working paper, USMC Command and Staff College, November 12, 2009), 2, 5.
- <sup>49</sup> Johnson, 88.
- <sup>50</sup> Ricks, 225.
- <sup>51</sup> Ricks, 232.

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